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The school of the future has no doors

Paolo Quattrone on how education is changing in the digital age.

Think of a lecture in a traditional classroom at the beginning of the 20th century: Lines of (mainly) men seated on a huge lecture theatre, listening in silence to a professor declaiming his lecture. Think of a classroom today. After ten minutes from the start of the class, students are already uncomfortable in their chairs, checking e-mails on their tablets and very likely rating the professor's lecture in real time on a social network.

People of my age (mid-forties) have learnt what they know by spending hours reading printed books. Those born now will have a completely different knowledge experience from mine. After an oral, manuscript and printed culture, knowledge is experiencing a digital revolution. And the implications of this knowledge revolution are not clear. So here are some ideas to prompt a reflection.

New forms of learning have implications, particularly if we want to keep students attentive in class. Their experience needs to change to account for their much greater exposure to a world of images rather than texts. So learning spaces, as well as learning practices, are changing.

A piece of news attracted my attention the other day: private equity investments in education are still relatively low but growing at a double-digit percentage. Universities are no longer so central in this network of knowledge production. Others are becoming key parts of this net and among these, not surprisingly, are media and entertainment firms. If anything their entrance in the field will make lectures less boring.

As a professor with 20 years' teaching experience, the entrance of media in the education sector is not surprising. I think that in a relatively short period there will be a different balance among different learning activities. There will be a greater relevance of online and social network interactions. Knowledge will be more a group and social experience rather than an exclusive relationship between teacher and pupil. There will be fewer lectures and more workshops of the kind that happen in architecture and design firms, with prototyping replacing exercises, also in apparently dry fields such as accounting (my own!).

This means the lecture will mix different forms of learning, languages and styles of expression and communication. The professor will be more of an orchestrator of this new learning experience, collaborating with media experts for educational purposes.

Of course, there will be risks and opportunities. The risk is exemplified by an anecdote that a colleague of mine recounted (I do not know whether it is true or not). A professor at a major US institution was recording a lecture to be broadcast on the internet. At one point he asks a question to the audience. He receives no reply. He then asks the question again, thinking that students, even in the most prestigious institutions, are always shy. He receives no reply, but one of the 'students' whispers: 'Professor, we are not students, we are actors!'.

The advantage is a greater democratization of education with more engaging experiences for all the parties involved. The digital age floods us with an ocean of information and without a critical mind we will not be able to differentiate what is useful from what is useless. And without an education that nurtures our intellects rather than our skills, we will not have maps to navigate such an ocean.

I think we have to move in between the world of practice and the world of academia. The world of practice alone will not be able to provide the needed expertise by accumulating experience as much as the academic world will

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not be able to avoid a constant engagement with the world of the profession, the economy and society in order to understand changes in learning, society and the economy. Inhabiting this new space "in between" seems to me still an exciting mission still worth of being pursued.